

By Mrs. Winthrop H. Saunders

The desire for a meeting house at Hopkins Mills apparently grew out of the revival services which were first held in other parts of the town and then were brought to the Mills district both by the people from the outlying sections and by the district's own residents.

Many of these meetings were held in homes, in the school house and sometimes in empty barns or lofts. These meetings were well attended and very enthusiastic. Various ministers and lay men held them and a wave of religious fervor brought the people, young and old, together. People walked or drove in wagons or sleighs many miles to attend these meetings. The building of the Hopkins Mills Chapel, especially for the Sunday services was the ultimate outcome, but for a good many years even after the meeting house was erected, the mid-week services were held in homes, especially in the home of Orrin Stevens "where there was a big room."

Mrs. Esek Walker espoused the cause of the proposed meeting house and started a subscription list. Mrs. Walker, more familiarly called Jane Walker, lived at the foot of Dolly Cole Hill. She was not a native Rhode Islander, but came from somewhere in the South. However, she fitted into the community and became one of them, becoming intensely interested in the proposed house of worship. She was a friendly person, very pretty with short curly hair and was also a woman of intelligence, commanding personality and was an excellent talker. She made the collection of funds for the proposed religious edifice her own particular project and traveled far and near, wherever it seemed possible to get a contribution to the fund. Travel was difficult in the years 1869-70 and 71. The hills were steep and sandy, the "thank-you-marms" took the breath of either man or beast before the top of a long hill was reached, but nothing daunted Mrs. Walker, who made many trips to Providence and nearby locations to gather in the subscriptions, either large or small, realizing with satisfaction that the sum was gradually getting large enough, so the meeting house might soon become a reality. In the period, the public transportation from Foster to Providence was by the Danielson stage, a typical old time stage coach, drawn by either four or three horses and the trip required three hours or more, depending on the season of the year and the weather. The fare was 75 cents. Many trips did Jane Walker make to Providence, paying her own fare, to visit many of the business houses and liberal people who might be induced to add a little to her cherished project.

The following is the heading of the subscription list:--

"We, the subscribers, do agree to pay the sum set against our names for the purpose of building a house for the worship of God and for Sabbath Schools, which house shall be a free house and to be located in the vicinity of Hopkins Mills, Foster; the cost to be about \$2000."

A record of all donors was carefully made and the contributions ranged all the way from "cash 25 cents" to two donations of \$100 each. Several business firms contributed, namely Perry Davis and Son, makers of the famous Pain Killer which was found in practically every home; Snow, Claflin and Co. wholesale druggists; Taylor Symonds & Co. (still doing business under the same name); Knowles, Anthony and Danielson, publishers of the Providence Journal; and many more. A noon-day prayer meeting held in Providence May 20, 1870, netted \$9.05. One contributor of national fame was Amasa Sprague of the famous firm of A. and W. Sprague Manufacturing Co. Another interesting name on the list is that of N. W. Aldrich, who was born in Foster and who later became one of the Rhode Island United States Senators and a national figure in the political and financial world. One man, to whom Mrs. Walker told her story, said he was not particularly interested in the meeting house, but she was such a convincing talker that she had earned \$5.00, and promptly passed it over to add to her steadily growing building sum. To read the list of all the contributors, none of whom were wealthy, is like reading a roster of the entire population of that little hamlet. Almost everybody gave something, either cash, materials or labor. Finally the sum of nearly \$2,000 was in sight and it seemed time to begin active operations for building the meeting house and an organization of citizens was called.

Quotations from original records.

"South Foster Meeting House"

"In the month of August in the year of our Lord 1868 Mrs. E. J. Walker opened a subscription to obtain funds for the erection of a house of worship to be located in the vicinity of South Foster or Hopkins Mills and in the month of November following, the subscriptions for the above purpose had reached an amount that it was thought necessary to form an organization, therefore a meeting was called by request of Mrs. Walker to be held at Hopkins Mills School House on Monday, November 23, 1868, for the purpose of forming an organization and doing whatever might be thought necessary to forward the above object."

"A meeting of citizens of South Foster and vicinity of Hopkins Mills was held on Monday evening, November 23, 1868, at Hopkins Mills School House for the purpose of devising plans for the erection of a meeting house to be located near Hopkins Mills.

Voted: - Hiram Stone - chairman
Herbert A. Potter - secretary

A committee of 5 to draft a constitution and examine lot for location of said meeting house.

Committee: - James E. Rounds
Mrs. E. J. Walker
Lewis Rounds
Hiram Stone
Mrs. Caroline Rounds

Adjourned to Nov. 27, at 6 o'clock at this place."

"November 27, 1868 Meeting called "according to adjournment," Committee on constitution reported and not being considered sufficient, referred back to committee for further consideration.

Committee on location reported favorable to lot offered by Henry A. Davis and said lot received, accepted and established as lot to build said meeting house on.

Committee of 3 appointed to draft a house and ascertain cost.

Committee: -- Herbert A. Potter
Alden Rounds
Esek Walker

Meeting adjourned to Saturday December 12, 1868 at school house.

December 12, 1868 Stormy - Meeting called, but adjourned to
Dec. 18, 1868

December 18, 1868 Met and voted adjournment to Dec. 22

December 22, 1868 Committee on constitution reported and after a few alterations, amendments and filling in of some blanks it was unanimously adopted."

Excerpts from the Constitution

"This organization shall be called the South Foster
Union Chapel Society."

"Whereas; - Believing it to be the duty of all mankind to worship our Creator, from whom we receive all good and by whom the plan of salvation is prepared, whereby all mankind may be redeemed from the throldom of sin and placed in a state of happiness and Whereas;- An effort is now being made to collect funds for the erection of a house of said worship and a considerable amount of money has already been subscribed for the above purpose; - therefore Resolved; that we, the contributors to the above fund hereby pledge and bind ourselves to the following articles of agreement for the erection, government and maintenance of a suitable house of worship to be erected in the afore-said vicinity of South Foster.

Article 1 - Such house of worship shall be erected and maintained by funds raised by voluntary subscription and said house shall be free for all to enjoy alike, and shall be opened and used for intellectual, social and moral, as well as religious gatherings and shall be free for the use of all evangelical denominations at all times, with the following restrictions, viz; - that no one denomination shall occupy the house more than 1/4 of the time in each month in the year, to the exclusion of other denominations."

Article 2 Provides that subscribers to the building fund or that may later subscribe to any fund to repair or improve the house or surroundings in the amount of \$5.00 shall have a vote on all matters where action of subscribers be required, Stockholders giving \$20.00 shall have two votes and an additional vote for each additional \$20.00. Majority votes shall rule, except on questions to amend these articles of agreement, or on a proposition to remove or dispose of said property - then a unanimous vote required.

Article 3 Refers to annual meetings

Articles 4, 5, 6, and 7 refer to officers and their duties. Three trustees were designated.

Article 8 Trustees. The trustees shall have charge of said meeting house and decide who shall use the house and for what purposes. One trustee shall attend all gatherings to see no injury is done to the property and proper order maintained."

There were in all 17 articles which seemed to cover all questions and contingencies necessary for the proper working of such an organization. The constitution was signed by only 2 of the committee, namely Esek Walker and Hiram Stone. Later was added the clause, that any one furnishing material or labor to the amount of \$5.00 within one year should have a vote,

December 28, 1868

Meeting called; -

Voted: -	President	Herbert A. Potter
	Secretary	Esek G. Walker
	Treasurer	Alden P. Rounds
	Auditor	James E. Rounds

Trustees -	Albert F. Hopkins
	Lewis Rounds
	Hiram Stone

Solicitors -	Mrs. E. G. Walker
	Mrs. Catherine Simmons

The name of the house shall be "South Foster Union Chapel."

Committee of two appointed, -

Albert F. Hopkins
James E. Rounds

to confer with Henry A. Davis regarding lot.

Committee to ascertain cost of building:-

Lewis Rounds
Hiram Stone
Herbert A. Potter

January 11, 1869 "Met according to adjournment" Voted size of meeting house shall be 30 x 40 feet. Committee on lot reported lease of land from Henry A. Davis and George Walker obtained.

January 20, 1869 Voted to appoint a building committee of one person to attend to the construction and any other business in connection therewith, that person was Albert F. Hopkins. Also Alden Rounds was appointed to superintend grading of meeting house lot.

April 10, 1869 Committee reported lease stamped and recorded and Albert F. Hopkins foreman to fix lot.

May 1869 Albert F. Hopkins appointed to appraise all lumber given toward erection of meeting house.

No records from date of the above record for nearly two years when it is supposed the meeting house was in process of construction, as the next following record shows the annual meeting held in "Meeting House," as follows;-

May 1st, 1871 Annual meeting of the South Foster Union Chapel held at the Meeting House of the society. A vote of thanks given the building committee. Esek Walker appointed to finish the house.

May 13, 1871 At a meeting held this day the matter of furnishing the house was considered.

The foregoing are practically the only written records of the beginnings and construction of the Hopkins Mills Union Chapel. There evidently were kept no bills of lumber, nails or other materials needed in the construction, or written reports of the voluntary labor or progress of the building. Hearsay tells that practically every man in the community helped in the construction in some way, but thus far no diaries, reports or records have been found.

Mention, in the reports of the last annual meeting, was made of the furnishing of house, and recollections of an old resident state that the first pews came from an old church in Brooklyn, Conn. and two men, Albert F. Hopkins and some one of the Curtis family went after them, probably with two teams. The first pews were some years later replaced, but nobody seems to know just where the present pews came from.

The bell has been a subject of much conjecture, and so far as possible to ascertain it was bought in the spring of 1884, but where it came from nobody seems to know. We do know that the money was raised by subscriptions and by many bean suppers held by the women all over the district. An old dairy says that it weighed between 700 and 800 pounds, was toned in the key of C and cost \$189. Elder Henry Hopkins stated the bell said, "Pork and be-e-e-ans-hung me up; pork and be-e-ans-hung me up." One old lady recalls that when she was a little girl and a pupil in the Maple Rock School, a low gear with the bell loaded on it went through the road, headed for the Chapel. It was such an unusual occasion that the teacher dismissed the school to see the sight. It must have been quite a pull over the big "Thank-you-marms" on Witch Hill. How it was hung up into the belfry or by whom we shall never know, but a former resident says that when he went to school one morning it was on the ground, and when he returned at night it was up in the belfry. Its clear tones carried far across the valleys and reverberated from the hills. One important use of the bell was to notify the community of deaths. In case of a death it was first rung in the ordinary way, and then tolled the number of times that indicated the age of the deceased.

There is a little that we know of the dedication of that community chapel. A diligent searching through many old newspapers of that time, revealed the following notice in the Providence Daily Journal of Oct. 6, 1871.

"South Foster."

"The dedication of the Union Chapel at South Foster will take place Sunday, October 15, at 12 o'clock. Ministers and singers are expected from abroad. A general invitation is extended to all."

The Manufacturers and Farmers Journal of Oct. 7, 1871 duplicated the notice of the dedication for Oct. 15th, but no further news could be found. From the "History of Providence County" by Bayles, a short note referring to the Chapel was found. It said, "The meeting house was erected in 1871 and on completion Rev. H. L. Hastings of Boston, Mass. preached the dedicatory sermon. Since that time ministers of various creeds have held services in the chapel and religious meetings enjoyed every Sunday."

A beautifully hand made collection box was made by Esek Walker from a black walnut tree felled on his own farm. Mr. Walker was a carpenter and had a work shop just back of his house. This box was perhaps 8 or 9 inches square with straight vertical sides and a long handle about 3 feet long, so there was no need of passing the box from hand to hand along the pews, but the collector could reach conveniently every one present.

This South Foster Union Chapel was very different from an organized church in that it did not have a steady preacher with a salary, but a different preacher supplied each Sunday with no compensation, nor was any expected. Most of them earned their living in other ways, but they offered their services to the Chapel willingly for many years, until failing health or death called them away.

The first Sunday in the month was, for many years, supplied by Elder Nelson Luther of Clayville of the Baptist denomination. The communion service was observed this Sunday had Elder Luther was usually assisted by some visiting elder or deacon.

The second Sunday of each month the pulpit was filled by Elder Henry Hopkins, an Adventist, who lived on the old Hartford Pike 4 or 5 miles north. He said the bell of the chapel could be clearly heard at his home when the wind was in the right direction. Elder Hopkins was very different in personality from Elder Luther. The latter was of a calm smooth disposition while Elder Hopkins was very fiery and emotional. When he got warmed up to his subject, he would jump up in the air, shout "Hallelujah" and sing a few words of a hymn. Some one in the congregation would shout "Amen." The people enjoyed the contrast between the two preachers. Elder Hopkins was a farmer and kept a lot of sheep. He also had a shop back of his house where he made axes, whose quality was unexcelled. He had a long white beard that reached to his waist and on cold or windy days he would button the beard inside his vest.

The third Sunday of the month was filled by Rev. Joshua Hill who formerly lived at Ponnagansett, but later moved into the town of Gloucester. He was a very different type of man from the first two mentioned, a graduate of Lapham Institute in North Scituate and a real Bible student. He always took a text and stayed with it. He taught school for a while and was also known as a very accurate civil engineer. His home was in the woods and he lived a very secluded life.

The fourth Sunday another man from Gloucester filled the pulpit, the Rev. Jonathan Eldredge, a whole-hearted man in presenting the Gospel. He was handicapped by a limited education. He studied after he was married and became a prominent man in gospel work and a very eloquent speaker, the words seeming to roll from his mouth. He was also a farmer and made charcoal, as in those days charcoal was in great demand, particularly in the jewelry manufacturing business.

The fifth Sunday which comes every three months, was filled by Elder David Hopkins and then for a time by Rev. William Durfee, a man of education and ability and a teacher for many years.

These faithful preachers neither expected nor received any compensation for their efforts in spreading the Gospel messages. Usually some one of the congregation would take them home for dinner for themselves and the horse (if there was one) but some of the preachers came on foot over the dusty miles and hoped for a lift on the way.

The Salvation Army was represented at one time and also the Crusaders held a series of meetings. Many evangelists have also held meetings there at different times. The building was always free to all.

The ordinance of baptism was frequently observed - always by immersion and usually in the rear by Saw Mill Pond, but sometimes in one of the neighborhood brooks or rivers. No records seem to have been kept of such baptisms.

Henry Davis who lived nearby, until he moved to Connecticut, and afterwards Orrin Stevens, took care of the chapel; sweeping, making fires, cleaning and filling the many kerosene lamps. It was entirely a labor of love, like the preaching. Nobody thought of expecting or giving any compensation.

Mention has been made of Orrin Stevens who fixed up a big room in his house especially for prayer meetings. He could not read or write, but had memorized so much scripture that his exhortations were filled with Bible references. He had a very fine singing voice. In his daily work he was a famous builder of stone walls, and also made handles for Elder Henry Hopkins famous axes. In the early days there was a mixed quartet composed of Addie Durfee soprano, Belle Hopkins alto, Allen Arnold tenor, and Hermon Tucker base.

The sheds in back of the chapel, big enough to shelter 8 or 10 teams, were built in 1884. It was necessary to protect the horses from the storms and cold while the families were attending services in the meeting house. In the early days the sermons were not 15 or 20 minute discourses, but often lasted an hour or more and were frequently followed by an "experience meeting", where any of the congregation was privileged to speak. Some times when a member got too loquacious and the end seemed no where in sight, some one would start a hymn, soon to be joined by the rest of the congregation to "sing them down."

The present large blocks of granite for the steps are not the original steps, but were obtained from a quarry near Foster Center and put in place about 40 years ago at a cost of \$50.00.

On January 28, 1875, the South Foster Sewing Society was organized with Mrs. Caroline Rounds as its first president. Mrs. Jane Walker was vice president, Mrs. Susan Hill was secretary, and Miss Rhoda Hill treasurer. Men were also admitted as members of this society, but just what sewing they did is not clear. However, all helped in working for the chapel. This organization existed about ten years, then disbanded. It was voted to give what money they had in their treasury toward an organ.

On November 17, 1885 the Ladies Aid Society succeeded the previous Sewing Society and has been of great aid in caring for and improving the chapel, both interior and exterior, for many years. They also have provided the red carpet, the pulpit furniture, individual communion service, book racks on back of pews, hymn books at different times and many other services besides helping worthy families where disaster or destitution required assistance. Money was raised by giving lawn parties in the summer time, strawberry festivals in season, bean suppers most any time and piecing and tying bed quilts to sell. The album quilts, also the autograph quilts were very popular. In these, white squares were left in the middle of each block, and different people would pay a dime or more, to have their name either stamped or written in indelible ink thereon. A quilting bee around at the houses to make up these many quilts was the occasion for a social time for the women folks. All these money raising affairs, were big occasions in the days when each community furnished its own entertainment for the dual purpose of having a good time and raising a little money for a good cause. For many years Mrs. Nettie Simmons Rounds was president.

According to the constitution, the meeting house could be used "for intellectual, social and moral as well as religious gatherings" and so it was, as concerts and various kinds of entertainments were held there. Unfortunately no records are known which would tell us the story of these times, but from a participant we learned that during the winter of 1888-89 a Debating Society was organized that met weekly in the Chapel. One subject of a debate was, "The value of shipping by water as compared with railroads." Another subject was, "Resolved that a poor man has a better time in life than a rich man." One week Byron Angell made a speech on "Power", and maintained that all power was invisible.

After some years many of the old folks who worked and maintained the chapel had gone to their reward, and no preachers were available for just the joy of preaching, so the religious interest seemed at quite a low ebb. Finally Philip Curtis, a partner of the village store and post office, took over the Sunday services and a few faithful souls carried on the work of the chapel. In this way, the spirit of the pioneers of the chapel went forward, until other hands and new faces could be found to revive interest and build a bigger congregation.

On a pleasant October Sunday in 1926, after reshingling the building had been completed, also redecoration of the interior and installation of electric lights, besides some other improvements, there was held a Re-Dedication Day, when people and families who had known the chapel many years before, were invited back to renew old acquaintances. It proved to be almost an "Old Home Day" and persons who had not seen the place in many years returned to once again walk through the familiar doors and sing together the old hymns that are ever new. Tables were spread out back of the chapel for the benefit of those who had brought lunches, and once again hands were clasped in greeting old friends and neighbors that time and distance had carried far apart.

At that time, Mrs. Estella Walker Allen, the only daughter of Mrs. Jane Walker, who had solicited the funds for the building of the chapel, unveiled a bronze plaque in memory of her mother. It reads:-

In Memory of
JANE WALKER
through whose efforts
and tireless energy
this house was built
and dedicated to
the worship of
God.

Oct. 2, 1870

So far as memory goes, twelve persons were present who were also present at that first dedication in 1871, among them being four of the children of Elder Henry Hopkins. They were Arnold C. Hopkins of New Bedford, Ernest Hopkins of Berkley, Mass., Mrs. Amietta Hopkins Davis of Bridgewater, Mass., and Mrs. Isabelle Hopkins Arnold also of Bridgewater. Also present were Hermon Tucker, Cynthia Rounds Hopkins, Sarah Rounds Sweet, Allan Arnold, Byron Rounds, William Durfee and Sidney Stone of Danielson. Perhaps the names of others may later be found. The principal speaker of the day was Dr. Fett, a physician from Providence. A young peoples' group from the Mt. Pleasant Church took charge of the evening meeting and a special quartette furnished music for the day.

A beautiful big picture, "Pilgrims Going to Church" was given to the chapel by Mrs. Sarah L. Sweet of Providence in memory of her father and mother, Alden P. Rounds and Hannah Rounds who were among the first workers and supporters of the meeting house.

As the years have rolled along, six weddings are known to have been solemnized in the little chapel, the first in 1888 and the last in 1948. If there have been others there are no records to tell us. Innumerable funerals have been held there, as gradually the Grim Reaper has called the persons who made up the little community and the last rites were tearfully held in the meeting house for which many had worked so long and earnestly. One former resident has been trying to recall as many as possible and already has a list of fifty-five names. Many of these departed now rest in the little "Grave Yard" as it was always called, just a short walk from the chapel and within full view of it. The work they did was not interred with their bones, for they builded better than they knew and their children, grand children and even strangers are benefitting by their work and many sacrifices, and rise up to call them blessed.

As the years have moved along other faces have joined the community and the ones left, who were but children in the long ago, still carry on with increasing interest and growing activities. The interior of the chapel was quite completely changed in 1947, several memorials were given, the same bell still peals its welcome across the hills and meadows and the pews are pretty well filled. The people can hear the truths from the same Good Book and join in the same good hymns.

Hopkins Mills or South Foster, two names for the same community, was very definitely a rural area and had so remained for a century or more, with but few changes in the life and habits of the strong and sturdy folk that comprised its population. Now its distinctive rural flavor has largely departed and it is actually suburban, with many of its men folk commuting to business in Providence, covering the distance in less than half an hour, that took John Richards with his stage coach to very laboriously drive in three or more. But the sturdy and well built country churches are forever a monument to those pioneers of a former day who built and labored to make such New England communities the example and back bone of a growing nation, - our United States of America.

These rambling accounts were compiled from original records, newspaper accounts and recollections of children and grand children of those most concerned.

January 1950.